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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of helping at-risk students avoid dropping out of school by providing an appropriate curriculum for them. If school systems are to achieve greater educational success with at-risk students, they must move beyond traditional approaches. They can do this by: identifying and helping students who demonstrate little or no interest in achieving in school; working with students who are truant; and helping students who tend to leave school before graduation. School districts must provide programs that better meet the needs of at-risk students and programs that better handle negative factors affecting students' school attendance and achievement. This paper defines classic dropouts (e.g., students who are minority group members from families that do not prioritize education, have academic difficulties, and are frustrated or bored in school). The paper also: describes how to establish a system-wide plan; examines the importance of school reform (focusing on state curriculum guidelines and reform activities); and discusses how to make school reform work. It concludes by discussing lasting curriculum reform, which should involve a change of attitude combined with understanding. (Contains 24 references.) (SM)

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Curriculum for At-Risk Students

By

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"The meaning of the term 'at risk' is never very precise, and varies considerably in practice. One possible definition is that students who are at risk are those who, on the basis of several risk factors, are unlikely to graduate from high school." (Slavin, Karweit, and Madden, 1989).

The need to help students "at Risk of school and life failure" is indisputable. Statistics on both the positive and negative sides of the ledger overwhelmingly attest to this. Such factors as earning power, economic stability, personal independence, self satisfaction, and social influence are obviously enhanced by school success(graduation).

The following points actually demonstrate this idea: Three major factors are important to note.

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1. Economic implications of dropping out of school are astronomical.

2. The overall lack of school success continues to be a major factor inhibiting economic opportunity among minority groups.

3. The unemployment rate of high school dropouts is four times higher than for graduates. As well, dropouts earn approximately $200,000 less over a lifetime, than a high school graduate.

If school districts are to achieve greater educational success with students at risk, they must to beyond the more traditional approaches. For instances the should attempt to improve their capabilities of instructing children, who are more difficult to educate. They can do this by: (a) identifying and helping those students who may demonstrate little or no interest in achieving in school; (b) by working with those students who are truant; and (c) by helping those who too commonly leave school prior to graduation. the above examples are classified as "students at risk." A school

district and its administrators hoping to provide a program that can better meet the needs of such students must also provide such a program to better understand and cope with negative factors affecting a student's school attendance and achievement.

The Classic Dropout

Precise categories or topics for identification purposes of "at-risk students" vary considerably, and interestingly enough only a few common definitions have emerged. The popular definition that students who are at risk are those who are probably not going to graduate from high school takes into account a few "risk factors." Those risk factors are low achievement, retention in grade, behavior problems, poor attendance, low socioeconomic status, and attendance at schools with large numbers of poor students. All of these factors are closely related to dropping out of school. More important, research has found that by the time students are in the third grade, one can fairly reliably predict which students will ultimately drop out and those that

will complete their schooling (Howard and Anderson, 1978; Lloyd, 1978; Barber and McClellan, 1987; Hamby, 1989; Slavin, Karweit, and Madden, 1989). These risk factors are stress-related and ultimately affect the identification and predictability of dropouts, with actual performance as the most reliable predictor.

With the above ideas concerning at-risk in mind, this investigator moved toward identifying characteristics of "classic dropouts." These characteristics are well documented. For instance the individual will likely be a member of a racial, ethnic, or language minority group and from a family where education is not a high priority; the individual will have academic difficulties, including the possibility of being behind in grade level; the individual will be bored or frustrated with school. The process of dropping out will often include a growing number of tardies and absences, disruptive classroom behavior, and a decline in academic performance. One day, the classic dropout simply stops coming to school. One common factor that

research has brought to light is that schools and school systems that are effective in reducing the numbers of dropouts do not permit this classic scenario to reach fruition. Through early identification, the high risk student is not permitted to become just another statistic. Absences or behavior problems are not merely observed; action is taken to understand the causes and to prevent unnecessary repetitions. Where needed, the students is directed to the individual within the school (a counselor, a teacher, or an administrator) who is best prepared to understand the problems of the student and to work that student in addressing those problems. Students are not allowed to "disappear." When the decision to leave school is not reversible, the school points the student to alternative programs and options for keeping the door to an education open while more pressing needs are tackled. The student, in general, is made to feel that an individual cares, and also that the school cares.

The decision to drop out is rarely impulsive, although a single event may precipitate the decision for

a student already bordering near that decision point. Most often a set of interrelated factors will have been operating for many years and moving the student closer to the decision to leave school. These factors will likely be drawn from the following list:

* a history of failure in school
* being older than fellow students due to retention
* lacking credits to graduate
* having low self-opinion as a student
* feeling like a "failure"
* disliking school
* being disinterested in school
* feeling alienated or unsafe at school
* not participating in extra-curricular activities
* lacking self-discipline
* having poor study skills and study habits
* being weak in reading and basic mathematics
* exhibiting disruptive classroom behaviors
* have a large number of absences and class cuts
* being in conflict with one or more teachers

* having a developed set of reasons for lack of school success
* having a developed set of values to reinforce negative position regarding school
* associating with peer who share these values
* being from a fragmented family
* having little encouragement at home to graduate
* feeling pressure from family to work
* feeling pressure to leave home
* being married
* being pregnant
* finding work can be more rewarding than school
* getting involved with drugs or alcohol and finding it difficult to study and attend classes

These factors can and do combine in multiple combinations and with varied weights from student to student. Therefore a single response, or even a small set of responses, is inappropriate. Instead, the ability of the school to mobilize its resources and customize a response to the individual's unique set of circumstances

is required. This is not unlike other areas of intervention, such as working with students with physical handicaps or learning disabilities, where individualized education plans are developed and implemented to satisfy unique conditions and needs. Some individuals within the school, and administrator or counselor or dropout coordinator, needs to assume responsibility as the advocate for the potential dropout to insure that this resource response is mobilized in time and in sufficient manner to make a difference to the student. However, the burden cannot rest on one individual, no matter how well-meaning and skilled that individual might be. A support network of individuals, programs, and organizations must be in place to provide meaningful remedies and alternatives.

A School System-Wide Plan

Students at risk need multiple resources, it is therefore imperative that schools, school boards network with multiple resources.

The first step is to establish a school/community policymaking council to serve children at risk and industry leaders with a vested interest in children's school success. Groups which should be considered include: church, business, school, service clubs, universities, colleges, vocational-technical schools, youth service groups, chambers of commerce, health and social services groups, chambers of commerce health and social services groups and local news media. As a rule of thumb, production levels of councils with more than 15 members are inversely related to the number of council members.

The next step is to identify youth and family services providers who can meet the needs of children at risk in the local community. Providers should be able to offer curriculum modifications, remedial instruction. parental involvement, pupil support services, and community support services for children at risk.

With a resource network in place, the council can develop short- and long-range policies and plans, both in

education put into motion a series of influences on schooling and teaching which have initiated dramatic changes in our schools and individual classrooms (A Nation At Risk, 1983; High School, 1983; A Place Called School, 1984; The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching, 1986; The Holmes Group, 1986; America 2000, 1991; among others). However, as often is the case when something is not as it should be, there is a reaction and that reaction is often only a quick (patchwork kind of) response to long standing and involved problems. Interestingly enough, the basic question of this decade continues to be: Can educators of the late 1990's insure, even after many "quick fixes," that our students will be in any better position to learn in today's and tomorrow's schools than in the recent past?

How Important Has School Reform Been?

A major focus of the reform movements of the 1980's was on the content of the curriculum. Providing a uniform curriculum to all students in a particular region

or state became the major emphasis of school/curriculum reform. Numerous state departments of education established sets of objectives in each subject area in order to insure that all students in that particular state are exposed to the same or similar experiences with the listed content. State curriculum guides continue today to be divided into sets of specific information that should be taught at each level so that the scope, sequence, and schedule is spelled out for the teacher. In addition, a number of states have or are beginning to adopt statewide programs for assessing exactly how each district, school, classroom, and pupil measure up to others in the attainment of the state curricular guidelines and mandates.

Formerly, state adopted curriculums were used only for suggesting basic content. Now, new comprehensive guides are not only strongly suggested but often mandated. School systems, schools, and classroom teachers are still free to add other objectives, but this has become more difficult to do since state adopted

curriculums have become more inclusive and therefore do not allow for many additions because of time limitations. Publishing companies have capitalized on this by circulating booklets throughout the various states which indicate how their textbooks will meet all the content mandated by that state. When the textbook selection process begins, the strongest criteria for selection has become not content but how well each textbook series matches the state's curriculum.

Because of state emphasis on specific content which schools must use, the newer state curricular mandates have had far reaching effects on how the curriculum is viewed. To hold the notion that a mandated written curriculum somehow insures what is to be learned in the classroom is to view curriculum from the narrow perspective of content which is contained in a written guide and can stand apart from other considerations. As educators are forced into this position, where curriculum is viewed simply from the standpoint of selection of subject matter, then simple solutions have and are

becoming commonplace responses to complex problems. State reform activities and actions quite often utilize this kind of "easy" selection process. The response for improvement has therefore been a straight forward (simple) one which says merely that content should be specified, and it should make certain that teachers use it. What this says to educators and literally everyone else about the curriculum is that it is nothing more than a bound document which outlines and specifies a series of lessons.

Few would argue that things are this simple. A more complex and integrative understanding of curriculum would include more than the content that is listed in a guide to be taught to students. Most experts in the field more often define curriculum in broader terms which includes intent, teaching, environment and student's perception of the material (Oliva, 1992). Perhaps Frymier (1987) best summarized this more complex and inclusive view when he identified curriculum as not only what is taught, but how it is taught, and why it is taught.

There is also much in the literature to support the view that our school's curriculum should be much more than what we "plan to teach pupils." Eisner (1994) describes the explicit curriculum as that which is consciously taught to students. He adds another dimension called the implicit curriculum as that which students learn from the culture of the classroom and school. This concept supports the notion that it is not possible and totally feasible to make a simple listing of content that students should know, and describe it as the minimum basic or quality core curriculum. Weade (1987) expanded upon these curricular ideas by noting that curriculum is different at various stages in an action time line. She viewed these stages as the planned, delivered, engaged, enacted, received, and finally the measured curriculum. Curriculum, as she views it, is more than what we consciously plan for students to learn and that it is not sufficient enough to simply plan and mandate content in order to somehow give students information that everyone needs to know.

State mandates about curriculum, although often an attempt to improve learning, do not deal with the implications and possibilities of something significant happening when the plans made by teachers enter into teaching and interactions within classrooms. These mandates ignore the teacher as a vital link for knowing when and how materials in different situations need different treatment and emphasis. When curriculum is mandated, as often is the case, many teachers just go through the motions of teaching so that they can cover the state mandated objectives. It is not easy for teachers to feel in control when this technocratic view has reduced the curriculum by not allowing for teacher input except at the level of "adding" when time and energy permits. Certainly the fact that teachers have completed a college program and have studied in their subject fields would suggest that this simple view of curriculum is not enough to fully use teacher expertise.

In addition to controlling the curriculum, many states have also embraced the notion that the "teaching"

of subject matter (i.e. curriculum) should also be controlled. How teachers should teach has become another major focus of state reform efforts. While the content was being decided upon this separate effort towards reform was also begun. Its intent was/is to define the way all teachers shall deliver their subject or content. Sets of teaching behaviors have and are being developed that are supposed to fit any and all teaching situations. Briefly, these effective teaching strategies describe certain teaching behaviors which have been researched to support the assumption that their use will raise achievement test scores. Effective teaching has become under this model those teacher actions related to beginning the lesson with review, presenting new material, conducting guided practice, providing feedback and correction, conducting independent practice and reviewing weekly or monthly instruction (Rosenshine, 1986).

The idea that there is only one (appropriate) way to teach effectively is not reflected in the studies on

diverse teaching strategies that can be used in the classroom. There are many such strategies and techniques which have become useful in teaching. Indeed, most teacher preparation programs introduce different teaching strategies and ask students to display a variety of these strategies in a student teaching situation.

Orlich and his co-authors (1994) in their book, Teaching Strategies: A Guide to Better Instruction, refer to a broad spectrum of techniques and approaches including questioning, discussion, small group work, inquiry, discovery, and simulations. Another similar text discusses different strategies as expository, discovery, discussion, and inquiry (Reiser and Dick, 1996). Henson (1993) talks about teaching strategies as the ways teachers plan to help students meet objectives. These and other authors demonstrate that teachers are the ones who should decide on appropriate ways to present the content of the curriculum. This is what teachers are supposed to be trained to do.

When required to use a specific set of teaching behaviors, the teacher loses all strategy options. Knowledge of other teaching models is not only not used, it is unrecognized at this time. Thus, teachers are required to use set teaching behaviors which eliminate professional decisions on how to teach. By attempting to reduce teaching to merely a single set of effective behaviors, assessment of instruction is reduced to looking for a list of certain things that all teachers must do. In order to receive a good evaluation, the teacher often acts in mechanistic ways in order to insure she/he exhibits all the effective teaching behaviors.

Control of how teachers teach can readily be seen by simply reviewing any newly generated state-wide or district-wide teacher regulation or evaluation form. Evaluations on these standardized forms is reduced to observing the act of instruction while ignoring influences of content, students, and environment. Quality is measured by how well a teacher is able to produce the effective teaching behaviors. The dynamics

and complexities of the classroom are eluded to under this system.

When the concepts and focus of curriculum and instruction are separated and reformers are adhering to the notion that they are dealing with two distinct entities, that can be reduced and analyzed. Prescriptions under these conditions are then made for each entity controlling a teacher's behavior. This reductionist and technocratic approach however does not allow for one area to impact or influence another, let alone see curriculum and instruction as intertwining. Rather, the reformers are viewing these concepts based upon narrow, simple and separate definitions. Curriculum for them is content that can be listed in a document and tested by end-of-year standardized tests. Instruction is a list of teaching approaches that can be described and observed. These are linear and separate ideas--the curriculum happens first and then instruction happens--each has little to do with the other.

A more complex, integrated, and realistic view of curriculum and instruction would include a meshing of the two concepts in which the teacher weaves strategies with content into various teaching/learning events. This meshing creates a continually developing curriculum in which both the teacher and student behaviors are important to eventual outcomes. Weade (1987) refers to this process as "the construction of meaning," that is, the processes by which the academic and social meanings (of curriculum and instruction) are created through the interactions among teachers and students.

For instance teaching a lesson about community to second grade children in a rural school would require a whole different set of assumptions, approaches and behaviors on the part of the teacher as opposed to teaching the same lesson in an urban setting. The interaction between the students and the teacher during the lesson of course will have great effect on the actual learning that takes place. It is not believed that a curriculum guide that contains a unit on "community" can

in itself represent the nuances that a teacher must bring to the lesson in order to provide meaningful learning.

Most of us do not believe it possible through a technocratic approach to create good teaching and learning for most classrooms. Reducing curriculum to specific content and instruction to particular teaching behaviors is unrealistic. Attempts to mandate curriculum and instruction as separate and simple aspects of the classroom process can only produce mechanistic teaching. As Wise (1988) states, "A teacher must make decisions based on knowledge of the student, of the subject matter, and of pedagogy in order to create the right conditions for learning." The blending of curriculum and instruction is central to the act of teaching. Given this current situation with our school's curriculum how best can professional educators work toward developing the kind of curriculums best suited to meet the needs of students in today's schools?

Making School Reform Work

Over the past few years educators have been told repeatedly, by various commissions, that teachers are failing to provide their students with the skills necessary for them and our nation to survive. We have been told what works, what does not work, and what might work. Even the ivory towers of the university have not escaped attack in the current attempt at school reform. As influential and widespread as the present movement might seem, however, it is perhaps one of the most superficial and short-sighted efforts in modern educational history.

Massive spending and increased legislative efforts are not what make a reform movement truly significant. Reform is important, legislation is helpful, and money is almost always necessary for educational improvements; but when enacted in a reflexive, defensive posture the results are bound to be of limited effectiveness. As the role and responsibilities of the school expands to take in more areas of a student's life than ever before, reform must become increasingly thoughtful and concerned

with the whole person. More importantly, future reform efforts must have a real sense of meaning, if they actually want to better our schools.

It seems to me that reform always comes back to the teacher, the community, money, and power. When this equation can be put in the proper perspective, some exciting things will begin to happen in education. It's a given that parents want the best for their children. Also that community and business leaders want a system that will produce quality leaders and workers. Finally it maintains that educators know what to do. The bottom line therefore is: money and power. Money spent in the best way and power shared will affect change.

Reform has to be more than data that stops at the classroom door. It must contain teaching strategies that will enable students to learn. Boysen says, "Mastery learning, writing across the curriculum, and computer-assisted learning must be the norm, not the exception" (Boysen, 1992). He feels all will fail unless teachers "engage" students in new ways. This won't just happen by

giving the teacher the green light to take the ball and run. There must be training, incentives, and accountability.

It seems to me that if reform is to work, the government must first deal with overwhelming social ills. It must provide support for families and protection for children. There needs to be commitment on the part of society for adequate prenatal care, infant nutrition, health, and social services. These are all preconditions for making any set of school reforms work.

Therefore I believe that for true and total reform in education to take place, the ills of society must be addressed. Simply saying, "Read good books" can be as weak a statement as telling someone to just say "no" to drugs. It's just not that easy. Instead of reacting negatively to programs that come from the top down or the political realities of tight purse strings or tests scores, educators need to find out what works and join hands to get the job done.

From all the cacophony of voices crying out their particular and somewhat biased views for quality education, a few key reform programs can be identified. These successful approaches to date include:

1. School-Site Initiated Reforms
2. Teacher Education and In-Service Training
3. Public Involvement at the Local Level
4. Funds Appropriated and Spent in the Proper Places
5. Shared Power with Parents, Teachers, and Administrators
6. Active Learning
7. Problem-Solving Activities
8. Tested Tools and Methods
9. Incentives and Higher Teacher Pay
10. Meeting Individual Needs
11. Innovative and Radical Changes
12. Accountability and Evaluation

Many of the above ideas/approaches have proven successful primarily because of individual attitudinal

change. For our schools to be what we all want them to be, we need to be about the business of making the dream a reality. There is no better place to start than with ourselves.

Lasting Curriculum Reform: A Change of Attitude Combined with Understanding

In his classic volume Realms of Meaning, Phil Phenix predicted a modern society characterized by destructive skepticism, depersonalization, fragmentation, overabundance, and transience (Phenix, 1964). These factors, he felt, would all contribute to a general sense of meaninglessness among learners of that future day.

Many believe that this sense of meaninglessness exists today. It discourages interest in contemplation and degrades the person into being a passive participant in an endless cycle of production and consumption. The modern learner lacks any of the authentic human meanings typical of a creative, responsible and free citizen. If such a dismal situation does exist, to any degree, then

calls for increased homework and length of the school year would only address the more superficial symptoms of a much deeper problem. What appears to be needed is a reform movement concerned or focused on providing appropriate (meaningful) educational experiences. A kind of ideological reform.

The first step in this new ideological reform would be to develop a meaningful school philosophy and curriculum This could be done by first proclaiming exactly what the new role of the school will be. From its conception, the school has always been involved in far more than teaching basic subject matter. The modern school has been given responsibility for nearly every aspect of a student's life from providing breakfast to teaching safe sexual behavior. Even though public schools repeatedly deny any role in the teaching of morals, religion, or any other value-laden issues. The fact remains that these (value) aspects of a child's development are directly inferred and taught, or at least greatly influenced by the school. Furthermore, any

meaningful curriculum worthy of consideration must deal with the issues of "real life." If the school pretends not to deal with those issues described by Phenix and causing the greatest conflict in children, it only furthers skepticism and lack of permanence (Phenix, 1964).

The need for schools and teachers to officially take this first step and proclaim an expanded role for themselves is easily justified through the physical and emotional problems facing today's youth at-risk. Increasing numbers of youth suicides, superficial materialism, and deteriorating family structures are growing statistics to consider. Since such problems and issues directly affect a student's academic performance, it would seem appropriate for the school to develop a pedagogy where methodology and content address the causes of these problems. In sum, educators and the public at large should no longer be satisfied with reform which merely raises standards and increases work load. The ideological cry should essentially be toward "re-

humanizing" (demonstrating concern and care for) our educational system.

Once our educational system accepts this extended (new) role for developing the whole child, it can begin to determine what is meaningful and meaningless within existing curriculums. Phenix refers to this as education's "special office" that can "widen one's view of life, deepen insight into relationships, and counteract the provincialism of customary existence--in short, to engender an integrated outlook" (Phenix, 1964).

A curriculum designed to counteract meaninglessness must reflect a sense of relatedness between subject areas and between what is taught and the goals of the school. Therefore, schools must take the time to develop, reflect, and adopt a philosophy of curriculum which will provide the comprehensive outlook that is necessary for intelligent decisions about inclusions and exclusions from the course of study. Overcoming fragmentation and transience in the life of our students is not likely if

their school experience does not model the organic quality we wish them to develop.

Providing a curriculum which is internally integrated is not sufficient in itself. The elements of the curriculum must also be related to the life and environment of the student. For education to be purposeful it has to stress an aesthetic appreciation for the style of a subject, the utility of the subject for the learner, and the inter relatedness of ideas (Whitehead). Passing on bits of information without demonstrating their importance, history, or relevance only supports the idea that most of what is taught in school has no value outside the classroom.

Although meaning can be given to any subject area, several lend themselves particularly well to developing an integrated perspective of the world. Language, history, religion, and philosophy are all synoptic in nature and, if presented effectively, pull together all areas of human existence. The sense of tradition and shared experience inherent in these subjects are

especially useful in counteracting modern feelings of impermanence and isolation. A meaningful educational program cannot be totally concerned with only subject matter. Academic preparation is but one aspect of educating the whole person. When determining the validity of various educational reform movements, persistence might be one useful standard. Proponents of more time in the classroom, more objective testing and management style instruction have been around for a relatively short amount of time. On the other hand, those who urge a whole person approach have surfaced repeatedly since classical Greece. Thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Rousseau, Comenius, and Thorndike have all argued that in one way or another, education at its best is concerned with developing the body and spirit, as well as the mind, of the learner. Meaningful curriculum reform, then, should certainly provide for the integration of subject matter with the nature of the student.

Like the academic portion of schooling, the physical education program should also demonstrate the inter relatedness between what is being taught and life outside of school. A meaningful physical education curriculum focuses on physical activity as a means to life-long fitness, social or personal recreation, as a way of enhancing performance in the workplace and at home. The traditional gym class takes on real meaning only if the participants learn to appreciate the continuing benefits of proper conditioning and the aesthetic and scientific complexity of the body's range of movement.

Perhaps the most neglected aspect of educating the whole person is that which develops the inner self--the aesthetical, character, or morality of the learner. This aspect of education is usually hidden in terminology such as transcendence, spirituality, religion, and feelings. Association with these terms often discourages the typical educator from dealing with the learner's inner nature. However, education of the inner self need not be religious or spiritual in nature. In fact, much of what

is called religious education in the parochial schools is viewed as detrimental to the student's inner development.

The inner self is developed in a meaningful way when the school's curriculum facilitates:

* a philosophic/contemplative frame of mind
* the creation and appreciation of objects of aesthetic significance
* an understanding of the importance of religion and philosophy in the development of societies
* an understanding and empathy towards people of other races and beliefs. Teaching this type of curriculum does not require a declared position of what is right and wrong. All that is required is that the student be provided with the skills and situations which will allow the consideration of options, analytic thought, and exposure to a wide range of people and experiences.

Needless to say, curricular reform as suggested in this article is time consuming, controversial, and difficult to implement. To effectively advocate a "meaningful curriculum" means avoiding the extremes of the past. Stressing the feelings and physical being of the learner without neglecting academic excellence has always been difficult to achieve. Additionally, implementing such reform requires that the reformers be able to think in the same philosophic, organic manner which the curriculum hopes to develop. Unfortunately, most of us have not been educated in that way.

Nevertheless, now is when meaningful programmatic and instructional reform must begin. It will not happen overnight and one cannot afford to wait for a social milieu which is more conducive to humanistic concern and contemplation. To do so means to wait for a near crisis situation and then once again rush in with hastily prepared, poorly planned "solutions." Yes, one has read this all before and will read it again! Yes, educational reform has always moved in cycles. However, with the

proper effort and concern, educators/administrators can for once determine the direction of the cycle, anticipate the needs before they are thrown at them, and prepare meaningful curriculum for meaningful reform.

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